

# THE “SNOWBALL” EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ROMA COMMUNITIES

Impact on Roma in Bulgaria,  
Greece, Italy and Romania

**JUSTROM**

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Council of Europe  
July 2022

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## INTRODUCTION

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■ This report aims to analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Roma communities participating in the EU/CoE Joint Programme “Roma Women’s Access to Justice (JUSTROM3)” countries, namely Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania. The report covers the period from February 2020, when the pandemic hit Europe, to December 2021<sup>1</sup>. It is based on the national reports by the JUSTROM teams and on other sources from the Council of Europe, European Union, NGOs and mass-media, which the author consulted in order to better reflect the pandemic and its impact on the Roma communities.

■ The structure of the report is the following: a general overview of the pandemic in the four countries (I); the impact of the pandemic on the Roma in the four countries, with a focus on: access to information, access to legal and public services, access to healthcare, housing, employment, women, gender-based violence and domestic violence, racial violence (II). The work of the JUSTROM teams during the pandemic is also highlighted (III) before conclusions (IV) to be drawn and recommendations (V) issued.

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1. Although some of the data regarding Covid infections and vaccinations were extracted in January 2022.

## OVERVIEW OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BULGARIA, GREECE, ITALY AND ROMANIA

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■ **Italy** was the first European country to experience the COVID-19 pandemic at its worst. The first COVID-19 patient was registered on 21 February 2020. From then on, COVID-19 gradually spread throughout Italy. The health-emergency status was formally declared in January 2020. In December 2022, the health-related state of national emergency was extended until 31 March 2022<sup>1</sup>. A generalised lockdown was formally declared in March 2020, which was then gradually lifted from mid-May onwards. A second lockdown was reinstated from October 2020. Schools closed<sup>2</sup> and moved online. Prohibitions and restrictions were put in place such as prohibition of gatherings, closure of commercial activities (with the exception of pharmacies, food-related shops, post-offices, etc); limitation on the public transportation and restrictions on travelling. Face masks and other protective devices, including hand sanitizers were insufficient in the beginning or lacking even in hospitals and similar places<sup>3</sup>.

■ In order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, the Italian Government put in place protective measures: allocation of money<sup>4</sup>, support for the families (in the form of increased child allowances/parental leave)<sup>5</sup>; suspension of taxes, mortgages.

■ Italy, like the rest of the European Union countries, started the vaccination of the population at the end of December 2020. As of 8 January 2022, 7 083 762 Italians were infected with COVID-19, out of which 138 697 lost their lives, making Italy the 10<sup>th</sup> most affected country in the world<sup>6</sup>. 74.3% of the population received two doses of the vaccine. As of December 2021, Italy made vaccination compulsory for people over 50<sup>7</sup> and the green pass<sup>8</sup> was extended.

■ The first proven case of COVID-19 in **Bulgaria** was registered on 8 March 2020. On 13 March 2020, the Government declared a state of emergency throughout the country for a period of one month, which was then extended several times until 30 April 2021.

■ On 8 January 2022, there were 775 525 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in all parts of the country, out of which 31 471 persons died, placing Bulgaria on the 53<sup>rd</sup> place in the world in terms of infections<sup>9</sup>. Two doses of vaccine were administered to 1 920 000 people in Bulgaria – which makes 27.7% of the population to be fully vaccinated. As such, Bulgaria ranks last in EU in terms of the vaccination rate<sup>10</sup>. The statistics as of 3 January 2022 show that Bulgaria is on second place (after Peru) for number of deaths for 1 million (4,524 people for 1 million).

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1. By Law-Decree No. 221, dated December 24, 2022.

2. Decision 5 March 2020.

3. See also FRA report on Italy and Roma : [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/it\\_report\\_-\\_covid-19\\_impact\\_on\\_roma\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/it_report_-_covid-19_impact_on_roma_en.pdf) Accessed on 12 January 2022.

4. Deliberation of the Council of Ministers, dated 31 January 2020,

5. Law Decree No.18/2020, dated 17 March 2020 (the so-called "Care for Italy Decree").

6. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

7. <https://fortune.com/2022/01/06/italy-covid-mandate-omicron-green-pass-unvaccinated/> Accessed on 8 January 2022.

8. Which constitutes proof of vaccination, recovery or a negative test. It is required for work, travel, most leisure activities and it now also covers entrance to banks, public offices and shops.

9. [https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?fbclid=IwAR2on8poFYDQBkq6iz3sJWs24vdPDw-Q6hwwwIwxcyl--KymI\\_2Gp4cTjs#countries](https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?fbclid=IwAR2on8poFYDQBkq6iz3sJWs24vdPDw-Q6hwwwIwxcyl--KymI_2Gp4cTjs#countries) Accessed on 08/01/2022.

10. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196071/covid-19-vaccination-rate-in-europe-by-country/> Accessed on 12/02/2022.

■ In **Greece**, the first case was registered on 26 February 2020. Measures involved medical checks, closure of certain public spaces, suspension of arts and sporting events (for instance, one day after Greece's first case had been detected, carnival festivities scheduled for 29 February were cancelled). All schools were closed on 10 March to be reopened again only in September 2020, and during the first wave of infections each new case was meticulously traced<sup>11</sup>. A ban was announced on all non-essential transport and movement across the country, starting with 22 March 2020. Movement was permitted only for a prescribed set of reasons<sup>12</sup> and citizens leaving their home were required to carry their identity documents with them, as well as a certification explaining the reason for their movement which had to be confirmed by their employer or by themselves. The options included filling in a special form that could be downloaded from a government website, sending a free SMS to the number 13033 or explaining their reason in a signed handwritten declaration.

■ During the first lockdown, the Greek police have recorded more than 20 000 violations and made 348 arrests of offenders. Penalties collected for these violations totalled approximately €9.3 million<sup>13</sup>. This indicates that the Greek authorities have treated this with major rigourousness, attaching significant importance to the punitive and preventive functions of penalties. There were stringent police controls throughout the country, with police officers stationed at all major junctions in the cities, highway tolls, and pedestrian zones, checking cars as well as pedestrians. The police even deployed drones and manned helicopters, especially during the Holy Week and Easter, to keep an eye on the customary exodus to the countryside and the islands. Law enforcement officers did not even relent for the few "rebel" priests and churchgoers who defied restrictions; those who performed and attended open services were arrested and fined.

■ In order to mitigate for the toll on the economy, compensation was provided for employees of businesses whose operations were suspended and the rents of certain professional spaces were reduced. The government announced a series of measures worth a total of around 24 billion EUR<sup>14</sup>:

■ A vaccination mandate for all residents of Greece over the age of 60 was approved by lawmakers on 1 December 2021. Monthly fines of €100 are issued for non-compliance after 16 January 2022. As of 8 January 2022, there had been 1 489 024 infections, out of which 21 328 people have died, while 66.3% of the population had received two doses of the vaccine<sup>15</sup>.

■ **Romania** is the second-least vaccinated country in the EU<sup>16</sup> with only 40.5% of the population receiving two doses. As of 8 January 2022, it ranks 29<sup>th</sup> among the countries with the highest infections: 1 839 825 infections, out of which 58 997 people lost their lives<sup>17</sup>.

■ The first case was registered on 26 February 2020 and on 16 March 2020 the authorities declared the state of emergency. Schools closed during the state of emergency, as well as restaurants, hotels, cafes, and clubs. On 24 March 2020, a national lockdown was instituted<sup>18</sup>, with the Government calling in the military to support enforcement of the new restrictions. Movement outside the home or household was prohibited, with some exceptions (work, buying food or medicine, etc.). For a period of time, people over 65 were allowed to leave their homes only between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.

■ The pressure on the Romanian healthcare system reached its maximum in October 2021, during the fourth wave, when Romania ranked on the 4<sup>th</sup> place in new infections worldwide and 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in terms of death rate per capita.

■ In May 2020, the Government announced the purchase of 250 000 tablets to facilitate distance learning activities. As of November 2020, just over 43 000 had been distributed to students<sup>19</sup>. According to a study conducted by World Vision Romania<sup>20</sup> in 2020, approximately 40% of the students in rural areas had not attended the online courses and only 64% of teachers organised such courses. Moreover, according to the same study, 1 in 4 rural schools did not have an internet connection.

11. <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/greeces-fight-against-the-coronavirus/> Accessed on 8 January 2022.

12. Which include moving to or from the workplace during normal business hours, shopping for food or medicine, visiting a doctor or assisting a person in need of help, exercising individually or in pairs or walking a pet, attending a ceremony (wedding, baptism, funeral etc.), and cases of divorced parents moving to ensure communication with their children. People returning to their permanent places of residence were exempt.

13. <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/greeces-fight-against-the-coronavirus/> accessed on 12 January 2022.

14. „Policy Responses to COVID19”. IMF. Accessed on 17 June 2020.

15. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196071/covid-19-vaccination-rate-in-europe-by-country/> Accessed on 8 January 2022.

16. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/6/vaccine-hesitancy-grips-romania-as-threat-of-omicron-surge-looms> Accessed on 8 January 2022

17. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> Accessed on 8 January 2022.

18. Military Ordinance No. 3.

19. <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/oms-recomand%C4%83-deschiderea-%C8%99colilor-rom%C3%A2nia-le-%C3%AEnchide-pe-toate/30933817.html> accessed on 12 January 2022.

20. <https://worldvision.ro/2020/08/04/studiu-world-vision-romania-viata-copilor-din-rural-in-pandemie-40-dintre-parinti-nu-au-reusit-sa-asigure-alimentele-si-produsele-de-baza-doar-60-dintre-elevi-au-facut-scoala-online/> accessed on 12 January 2022.

# THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE ROMA POPULATION IN THE FOUR COUNTRIES

**T**he COVID-19 outbreak was initially considered as “the great equalizer”<sup>21</sup>, as a virus does not discriminate on class, race or other grounds. However, when looking closer, populations such as Roma were more vulnerable and, thus, the impact of the pandemic among them was higher. In fact, according to a study published by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Roma communities were disproportionately affected both by the coronavirus crisis and the measures to contain the spread of COVID-19<sup>22</sup>.

■ At least two reasons explain why the global pandemic had a disproportionate impact on Roma communities. On the one hand, the COVID-19 outbreak widened and accelerated long-standing inequalities, poverty and discrimination. Structural problems only deepened, as one issue affected another like in an immense “snowball”, which only became heavier and heavier. Thus, vulnerable people became even more vulnerable during the pandemic.

■ Many Roma live in extreme poverty, in dense neighborhoods and overcrowded dwellings with little – if any- access to basic facilities, like running water. In this context, preventive measures such as physical distancing and sanitary good practices like washing hands often and for long periods of time were simply not attainable in many households<sup>23</sup>. However, instead of taking into account such hurdles, there were situations, like in Greece, where people were fined for getting out of the settlement to fetch running water<sup>24</sup>. But the difficulties were numerous and could be found in complying with all the measures put in place during the pandemic.

One Roma woman was stopped by the Italian police because she did not have her declaration filled in. She was going to take her blood exam and she was illiterate – which is why she could not fill in the declaration. Fortunately, there were no legal proceedings, but she did risk a fine of up to 3000 EUR and/or (in case of violation of quarantine) up to 12 years in prison.

■ There were no instances where authorities have taken into consideration the vulnerability of the Roma communities and did not adapt the policies put in place during the pandemic to cater for their specific needs.

■ In Italy, for instance, measures were included in the so-called “Care for Italy decree”<sup>25</sup>, such as extra funding for municipalities to cater for the vulnerable.

■ Each municipality introduced its own procedures of implementation, meaning that requirements differed from one municipality to another. Generally, they involved food vouchers for a three-month period or a food package, nearly on a weekly basis. The value of the food voucher varied accordingly. It also changed in accordance with the number of family members. From a procedural standpoint, the deadlines for application had been relatively brief, especially in Naples<sup>26</sup>. The applications could be submitted mainly online with all the related difficulties for those with no access to internet or who are illiterate. The JUSTROM team reached out to as many families as possible, providing information to about 250 adults and assisting around 120 persons in submitting their application for the food vouchers.

■ Given all these hurdles, the calls for food vouchers launched by the municipalities in Rome and Naples were challenged in court and the courts held the measure to be discriminatory, as the vouchers were to be given only to those who met the residence requirements<sup>27</sup>.

21. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/covid19-rights-impact-september-1> Accessed on 12 January 2022

22. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/overview\\_of\\_covid19\\_and\\_roma\\_-\\_impact\\_-\\_measures\\_-\\_priorities\\_for\\_funding\\_-\\_23\\_04\\_2020.docx.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/overview_of_covid19_and_roma_-_impact_-_measures_-_priorities_for_funding_-_23_04_2020.docx.pdf) Accessed on 12/01/2022.

23. Country report on Romania for JUSTROM programme, 2021.

24. See the case presented at page 13 of the report.

25. Law Decree No.18/2020, dated 17 March 2020 (the so-called “Care for Italy Decree”). The decree was however criticized for failing to provide for the most vulnerable and, as such, on March 28, 2020 the President of the Council of Ministers, Giuseppe Conte, announced that the Government will allocate 400 million Euros for the most in need for cannot afford to buy food for their families. The money were allocated to the Municipalities towards March-April 2020. Rome received about 15 million euros, Naples – around 8 million.

26. at least initially when the de facto time slot was between 6 April 2020 at 14:00 and 10 April 2020 at 20:00.

27. <https://napoli.fanpage.it/bonus-napoli-covid-migranti/> Accessed on 12 January 2022



## Health and access to healthcare

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■ In the beginning, the pandemic brought an unexpected equity in access to healthcare – in Romania, for instance, patients were treated equally, in terms of care and access to health facilities, which is unprecedented, given that many Romanians perceive the health system as favoring patients according to their social status and economic potency.<sup>28</sup>

■ In spite of such small instances of progress, the impact of the pandemic on Roma health and access to healthcare was serious, mainly because there were pre-existing barriers impeding Roma's access to health services, which were only accentuated by the pandemic.

### Pre-existing problems. Increased vulnerability

■ According to the 2016 European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey<sup>29</sup>, between 22% and 29% of Roma report long-standing health problems limiting their daily activities. As pre-existing conditions increase both the risk and gravity of COVID-19, Roma people seem to be finding themselves more exposed to this pandemic. Indeed, Roma face higher risks of contracting the virus, but also of developing health complications and suffering premature death, due to a high proportion of long-standing chronic illnesses. They are currently more at risk of malnutrition, which was already high before the pandemic.

■ Furthermore, there is a strong gap in health between the majority and Roma minority in all of the four countries considered for this report<sup>30</sup>. Health indicators in the case of Roma are worse than for any other group in similarly disadvantaged social positions<sup>31</sup>. In Italy, for instance, the infant mortality rate is estimated to be three times higher than of the wider population<sup>32</sup>.

■ Many Roma live in poor sanitary conditions – as they lack access to drinking (tap) water, sewage, electricity, basic hygiene and often live in overcrowded houses. In addition, Roma communities have been hit the hardest by the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, having resulted in widespread loss of livelihood and work opportunities. As such, many Roma families lack the necessary funds to acquire not only health insurance, but also protection equipment such as hand sanitizers and masks, and the necessary medicine to treat underlying conditions or palliate mild symptoms of COVID-19.

■ Moreover, Roma communities were hit hard by lockdowns, restrictions and other measures to reduce mobility, given that not many pharmacies or hospitals are in their vicinity. Often, telemedicine services were inadequate for the Roma communities, who have little access to the technology and skills necessary to take advantage of such services. It was not helpful either that many relevant stakeholders, including a number of humanitarian organisations, had to suspend their activities in the field. In sum, these issues caused increased difficulties for Roma to benefit from basic services, such as food, education, and healthcare.

■ Another major barrier in accessing healthcare services is related to the lack of IDs, and thus to health insurance. Although, in practice, emergency care for COVID-19 was provided even without health insurance, this issue should not be subject to extraordinary situations, but rather the result of clear legislative exemptions.

■ Apart from the above objective barriers, there is a distrust of Roma communities and individuals in medical authorities and a use of medical facilities rather in a reactive way (emergency services) than in a preventive way (no regular check-ups, untreated conditions). This means that many Roma will wait until they are in a very critical condition before turning to the healthcare system. In the context of COVID-19, this is often too late.

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28. „Global corruption barometer, European Union 2021 – Citizens' views and experiences of corruption”, Transparency International, p. 25

29. [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings_en.pdf)  
Accessed on 12 January 2022.

30. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2013), “Analysis of FRA Roma survey results by gender”. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2013/analysis-fra-roma-survey-results-gender> Accessed on 12/01/2022.

31. Lois Orton, Rachel Anderson de Cuevas, Kristefer Stojanovski, Juan F. Gamella, Margaret Greenfields, Daniel La Parra, Oana Marcu, Yaron Matras, Celia Donert, Diane Frost, Jude Robinson, Eve Rosenhaft, Sarah Salway, Sally Sheard, Elizabeth Such, David Taylor-Robinson and Margaret Whitehead, Roma populations and health inequalities: a new perspective, in *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*, Vol. 12, No. 5 2019, pp. 319-327. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/IJHRH-01-2019-0004/full/html#ref007> accessed on 12 January 2022.

32. “European monitoring centre on Racism and Xenophobia”, Breaking the barriers – Romani women and access to public healthcare, available at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/180-roma-hc-en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/180-roma-hc-en.pdf) accessed on 12/01/2022.

Finally, Roma have often experienced disillusionment with the healthcare system because of discriminatory attitudes and practices – which are inflated by lack of sensitive-training to healthcare workers, a less diverse health force, ingrained corruption and general collapse of the health system<sup>33</sup>.

## Mental health

Beyond the constant fear of infection and the mental distress caused by lengthy confinement and lack of visibility beyond the immediate future, Roma were disproportionately confronted with loss of livelihood and work opportunities, depletion of resources, loss of access to education, extreme lockdown measures under military control, heavy policing, scapegoating for the pandemic, rising hate speech and discrimination, among others, all in a matter of months. All these factors impacted heavily on Roma communities, as reported by JUSTROM teams working in the field. There are no official data available yet, which analyses this impact.

## COVID cases among the Roma population

All the above factors have made Roma particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, and all across Europe, including the four countries in focus, they have been disproportionately affected by the disease, both directly (in terms of increased rates of infections and hospitalisations) and indirectly (e.g., in terms of increased inequality and stigmatisation)<sup>34</sup>.

In June 2020, in Italy, for instance, the number of Roma people who tested positive increased in the Molise and Abruzzi Regions, and also at Mondragone (where 43 people tested positive and the area has been declared red zone)<sup>35</sup>. During the same period of time, 75 persons were recorded to have COVID-19 in Circumvallazione Esterna settlement in Naples, including some at Scampia settlement – they were in isolation while six more had been hospitalised<sup>36</sup>. Between December and February 2021, as reported by the JUSTROM team in Italy, about 8-10 families tested positive to COVID-19 in particular in Scampia and Circumvallazione settlements in Naples.

However, such data collection is sporadic and depends on the work conducted in the field, mainly because ethnic data collection is controversial and methodologically challenging<sup>37</sup>. The problems with collecting precise numbers of COVID-19 cases within Roma communities will also be observed in respect of the vaccination rates, as shown below.

However, “it is fair to assume that the risk is far greater for Roma than any other population” – as Željko Jovanović, director of the Open Society Roma Initiatives Office said<sup>38</sup>.

## Pre-existing problems with vaccination

Vaccination was already previously low within Roma communities<sup>39</sup>, in part for lack of adequate access to healthcare in general, misinformation about vaccines, as well as other specific issues: seasonal migration because of which many Roma families skipped vaccination for their children; sterilisation of Roma women (especially in former Czechoslovakia) which raised concern among the communities about the respect of the health ethics principles.

Furthermore, vaccines can also be difficult to access. In some European countries, large numbers of Roma are undocumented or do not have healthcare insurance<sup>40</sup> and, thus, cannot access COVID-19 vaccination programmes. Others cannot afford travel to the vaccination centres or are put off by what they perceive as widespread discrimination against them in the health-care system.

33. “Global corruption barometer, European Union 2021 – Citizens’ views and experiences of corruption”, Transparency International

34. Ed Holt, COVID-19 vaccination among Roma populations in Europe.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247\(21\)00155-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(21)00155-5/fulltext) accessed on 12/01/2022

35. The area reopened when all families overcame Covid-19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUHrrGCB-hI>

36. [https://www.ilmattino.it/napoli/cronaca/coronavirus\\_napoli\\_due\\_ricoveri\\_e\\_13\\_denunciati\\_campo\\_rom\\_scampia-5357798.html](https://www.ilmattino.it/napoli/cronaca/coronavirus_napoli_due_ricoveri_e_13_denunciati_campo_rom_scampia-5357798.html) Accessed on 12 January 2022.

37. Authors refer to the mishandling of ethnic data during the Nazi period – which at times reinforces the groups’ reluctance to share information concerning their ethnic background

[https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE\\_Datens%C3%A4tze/Jemie\\_2020\\_2/05\\_Carstoea.pdf](https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE_Datens%C3%A4tze/Jemie_2020_2/05_Carstoea.pdf) accessed on 12 January 2022.

38. Ed Holt, footnote 33.

39. Roma Health Mediators – Success and Challenges, Open Society Foundations, October 2011, page 19

40. [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings_en.pdf) accessed on 12/01/2022.

In Romania, for instance, a Roma person living in an informal settlement, lost her temporary identity document. She went to get the vaccine, but she was asked for the ID – which she could not present. She then went to the town hall (the Department Social Assistance and Evidence of Population) to obtain a temporary ID<sup>41</sup>. But, without the vaccine she could not enter the city hall to apply for the temporary ID, as the legal provisions require anyone entering public offices to present proof of vaccination.

Other barriers in low uptake in the vaccine were COVID-19 related and they were affecting Roma and other communities alike, such as politicisation and misinformation spread via social media. When the vaccination campaign started in Romania, registration for the vaccine was possible only online or via phone. In practice, it meant that many people were deterred by the waiting lists, especially for the persons with less digital skills.

## Initiatives to increase the rate of vaccination among Roma

In this context, there were several initiatives to increase the rate of vaccination among Roma.

In June 2021, Comunità di Sant'Egidio and Red Cross in Rome set up a specific Centre for the vaccination of the persons without IDs. The Red Cross launched a similar initiative at the Central Railway Station in Naples.

Governments had initiatives, as well. In Italy, a communication from the National Commissioner on Vaccinations, General Figliuolo<sup>42</sup>, was sent out to the Regions in August 2021, encouraging the vaccination of vulnerable people.

In Romania, Valeriu Gheorghiuță, the Romanian official in charge of combatting the pandemic, encouraged the Roma, in Romani, to get vaccinated, joining the efforts of the National Agency for Roma, which has launched a vaccination campaign. His message was: "*Na dara! Na-i chanci nasul, hai te cheras o vaccino!*" (meaning "Don't be afraid! It's not wrong! Let's get vaccinated!")<sup>43</sup>.

## Access to justice

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented effect on the functioning of the legal systems and on the access to justice in a timely and effective manner for the population<sup>44</sup>. Legal services were suspended during the lockdown periods. In Romania, for instance, all physical interactions with the public were suspended during lockdown (March-May 2020). In Greece, from April 2020 until June 2020 and from November 2020 until May 2021, all courts and their administrative services suspended their activities<sup>45</sup>. When they reopened, physical access was conditional upon prior appointment and many procedures were completed via e-mail.

Restricting the physical access to the courts and the new electronic procedures to avoid overcrowding introduced significant barriers for the Roma population. High illiteracy levels, lack of familiarity with and access to electronic devices and, in many cases, lack of fluency in the official language of the country, played an important role in increasing barriers.

Roma without ID documents, stateless and undocumented Roma<sup>46</sup> were literally invisible during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the courts and competent authorities were closed, stateless and unregistered Roma, even if they had the chance and the ability to pay for a lawyer and the court fees, still could not access a court to log a case file and proceed with obtaining documentation after a decision by the court.

41. She cannot obtain a permanent ID as he does not have a property, a contract of lease or a declaration that somebody accepted her in his house.

42. The communication has not been published online. Italian country report for the JUSTROM programme, 2021.

43. Watch from second 0.23 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ets2NMFqhac> Accessed on 12/01/2022

44. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cepej/impact-and-lessons-of-the-health-crisis-on-the-efficiency-of-justice-and-the-functioning-of-judicial-systems> and, [https://e-justice.europa.eu/content\\_impact\\_of\\_covid19\\_on\\_the\\_justice\\_field-37147-en.do](https://e-justice.europa.eu/content_impact_of_covid19_on_the_justice_field-37147-en.do) accessed on 12 January 2022.

45. Some safeguards were introduced for a certain period of time, such as postponing the deadlines for judicial and extrajudicial procedures and the freezing of all confiscations in case of unmet loans and public debts.

46. Based on their field experience, JUSTROM consultants estimate the number of undocumented Roma to reach few thousands, while many more Roma have their documents with incorrect data, and therefore invalid.

## Prisons

■ Roma detainees were also affected by the pandemic<sup>47</sup>. Suspended and/or reduced activities of the courts meant that trials were suspended, resulting in prolonged detentions and requests for release. Lawyers, defenders and relatives were not allowed to visit the inmates. JUSTROM consultants in Greece were not given permission to visit the women's prison in Thebes because of COVID-19 health regulations, despite previous authorisation. Deaths were reported among the inmate population, mainly because of limited access in prisons, even for healthcare reasons, in the context of the pandemic restrictions:

In April 2020, three detainees of Roma origin died inside a prison in Greece. As it was reported by JUSTROM beneficiaries to the programme's team, their death was due to lack of healthcare and restriction of their right to visit a hospital. Two women died within the first 40 days of lockdown. It seems they were both complaining of having serious pains, but no medication or access to a doctor was provided. In another case, a man died in the prison of Malandrino because of a tooth inflammation, which he had been complaining of for several days, but without being given serious medical treatment.

■ In Italy, during the first weekend of March 2020, the authorities suspended the rights of visitation by family members and the granting of semi-freedom measures<sup>48</sup>. Riots broke out in many prisons, including Regina Coeli prison in Rome<sup>49</sup> and Poggioreale prison in Naples. Twelve detainees died and forty guards were injured during an escape from the Foggia prison<sup>50</sup>. The Italian authorities announced mitigation measures, such as the supply of about 1,700 cell phones to facilitate contact of the inmates with the outside world<sup>51</sup>.

## Access to Public Services

■ Roma communities were also affected by limited access to public services. Many public offices started to work remotely, and the public was asked to make appointments via phone or e-mail. In the municipality of Fyli in Athens, for instance, only online applications were accepted.<sup>52</sup>

■ Electronic communication with the authorities created significant barriers to many Roma due to illiteracy, lack of access to electronic devices and to the internet. The work conducted on the ground revealed that, in many cases, even accessing the most basic certificates, such as birth or family status certificates, became difficult for those who could not complete the process online. This lack of access to certificates and government documents further reduced access to social benefits, free legal aid and other services<sup>53</sup>.

## Employment

■ Many Roma families were severely impacted by the pandemic, especially the ones working in the informal sector and/or not having IDs. The situation was aggravated by the fact that many Roma, and in particular women, were already severely affected by unemployment.

■ Many Roma active in commercial activities, working seasonally or in the informal sector (street vendors, travelling traders, working in the arts and culture field as musicians, daily labourers, those collecting and selling scrap metal) were affected twice by the pandemic: because of restrictions they could no longer perform their activities, which meant loss of income.

47. These restrictions had an unknown impact on detainees in general and to Roma women, in particular, who constitute an important percentage of detainees in many prisons in particular. No data of Roma detainees in comparison to other groups exist, but on the basis of the field visit of the JUSTROM team in one women's prison (in Thiva/Thebes), it was estimated that almost one third of the prisoners were Roma women according to the authorities of the prison.

48. See Law Decree No. 11/2020, dated March 8, 2020; and Decree of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers dated March 9, 2020, on "Urgent measures to contain and manage the epidemiological emergency due to COVID-19, to be applied to the whole national territory".

49. [https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/dettaglio\\_scheda.page?s=MII180401](https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/dettaglio_scheda.page?s=MII180401) accessed on 12/01/2022

50. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-italy-prison-riots-death-toll-modena-foggia-alfonso-bonafede-a9396311.html> accessed on 12/01/2022

51. [http://www.garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it/gnpl/it/dettaglio\\_contenuto.page?contentId=CNG7798&modelId=10021](http://www.garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it/gnpl/it/dettaglio_contenuto.page?contentId=CNG7798&modelId=10021) accessed on 12/01/2022.

52. In many cases these problems still persisted in December 2021.

53. Roma communities were particularly affected by the limited operation of the Roma community centers operating in many municipalities as branches of the social support services. As many Roma depend on these offices for administrative support regarding access to social benefits, their limited operation introduced significant barriers in accessing such services.

■ Those who had not been formally employed could not claim unemployment/redundancy schemes, as the social measures put in place referred to people who had lost formal and regular jobs. Furthermore, their lack of a formal residential address often excluded them from social security benefits, while most employment support measures adopted by governments to mitigate the impact of the crisis did not explicitly target or include them.

## Housing

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■ The pandemic worsened the living situation, already difficult<sup>54</sup>, especially in Romania when many Roma returned from abroad and rejoined their families. It led to overcrowding, space congestion, and difficulty in respecting social distancing and, at times, inter-community conflicts<sup>55</sup>.

■ In Italy, for instance, 79% of Roma live in settlements<sup>56</sup>. While basic services such as water and electricity are available in 70% of settlements and public transportation is available to nearly half of the settlements, other social services remain limited<sup>57</sup>.

## Forced evictions

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■ In spite of the pandemic, there were reports of some evictions of Roma communities. Four cases of forced evictions were reported to the JUSTROM consultants in Greece between March 2020 and April 2021.

■ Victims of forced evictions were affected by the measures against the pandemic (limited transportation, remote work, etc.) by having limited support from civil society and lower access to legal support, due to the suspensions of courts' activities, as shown above. However, in the case of Aspropyrgos in Attica region, civil society organisations have submitted to the European Court of Human Rights a request for interim measures. The June 2020 case referred to an alleged illegal eviction by the municipality of 100 Roma houses from a segregated settlement.

## Education

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■ Schools closed in all of the four countries and moved online for various periods of time. Unfortunately, Roma children faced serious difficulties in attending distance learning, which only widened already existing gaps: many did not have access to electricity, to internet or lacked electronic devices or, in the lucky cases they had such a device, they had to share them with their siblings and family. The Italian TV channel RAI 1 reported that one out of five school students had no access at all to this system due to the lack of personal devices at home. Studying at home proved difficult in the overcrowded homes with large families. Moreover, many Roma parents suffer from digital or functional illiteracy which means that their children do not have the necessary support while attending remote learning. Most Roma children also need learning and language assistance which is not easy to provide when schools are closed.

■ Schools also function as a safe space for many Roma children and an opportunity to leave their settlement, even to be provided with a hot meal. Closed schools meant that Roma children could not rely anymore on the safe spaces provided by the schools. Remedial classes for adults, such as the "second chance programmes or schools" in Greece and Romania moved also online, which meant that many Roma could not attend the classes anymore, due to digital illiteracy and lack of access to broadband/electronic devices.

■ Furthermore, measures put in place to assist students usually reached Roma communities with delay. Vouchers to purchase tablets and other equipment which started to be distributed in Greece in April 2020, reached the marginalised Roma communities in Drosero and Xanthi only in spring 2021, more than a year

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54. Up to 80% live in overcrowded Roma neighbourhoods; 40 % of them have no sanitary facilities and 30% live in households with no tap water, according to "Overview of the impact of Coronavirus measures on the marginalised communities in the EU – Summary of the Coronavirus on Roma", available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/overview\\_of\\_covid19\\_and\\_roma\\_-\\_impact\\_-\\_measures\\_-\\_priorities\\_for\\_funding\\_-\\_23\\_04\\_2020.docx.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/overview_of_covid19_and_roma_-_impact_-_measures_-_priorities_for_funding_-_23_04_2020.docx.pdf)

55. As reported by the JUSTROM team in Romania, 2021.

56. According to the data collected within the project "Gli strumenti di conoscenza e le sfide dell'informazione statistica per la strategia d'inclusione di Rom, Sinti e Caminanti", conducted in Italy between 2013 and 2015, in 163 municipalities (out of 203), 79% of Roma and Sinti lived in settlements – as reported by JUSTROM team in Italy, 2021.

57. On February 6, 2017, UNAR (National Office against Racial Discrimination) presented jointly with ANCI (standing for the National Association of Italian Municipalities) and ISTAT (standing for National Office of Statistics) the result of a two-year long project covering the period 2013-2015 ("Gli strumenti di conoscenza e le sfide dell'informazione statistica per la strategia d'inclusione di Rom, Sinti e Caminanti").



after the e-classes had begun<sup>58</sup>. In November 2020, the Greek Helsinki Monitor lodged a lawsuit against the Minister of Education for *de facto* excluding Roma children from remote education, given that the minister did not take any provisions to facilitate access to e-learning during the time schools had remained closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>59</sup>. In some cases, NGOs filled the gap. The JUSTROM team in Bulgaria, for instance, disseminated information about the online education and tried to identify those children who do not have access to online education because they do not have internet or the necessary technical devices. They also supported the campaign organised by the association Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance, for donations of old electronic devices.

## Women. Gender-based violence and domestic violence

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■ A sub-group within the Roma minority who has been further disproportionately impacted amid the COVID-19 pandemic is that of Roma women and girls.

### ► Supra-responsabilisation

■ One of the effects of the pandemic was a supra-responsabilisation of Roma women, especially in caring for their families and in relation to the household (for instance, in the beginning of the pandemic many Roma women had to create handmade textile masks as they lacked access to sufficient masks).

### ► Reproductive health and women's rights

■ As several health services were deemed unessential and halted for months, Roma women had reduced access to contraception, maternity, and gynaecological care, etc.

### ► Gender-based violence

■ According to the information collected on the ground, gender-based violence increased during lockdowns, as victims were forced to stay at home with their abusive partners. However, the cases remained largely underreported. The limited access to justice due to diminishing court activities, as seen above, reduced the reporting even further. On the other hand, reporting has decreased overall and not only for Roma women. The mistrust in public institutions, redress mechanisms and the police increased during the lockdowns. Especially for Roma women, evidence from the ground suggests that there is a significant lack of trust in the police and that they feel unsafe to go to a police station and file a complaint. Many Roma women explained their reluctance by referring to past negative experiences from the police, when they were treated with disrespect.

## Racist violence

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### Police abuses against Roma communities during lockdowns

■ Lockdowns had a real effect, especially for the most marginalised communities, as access to basic services was significantly reduced. Numerous Roma communities had limited or no food supplies or medical provisions during confinement or quarantine, which additionally worsened their health status and increased their vulnerability to the pandemic. Furthermore, lockdown of Roma settlements was ethnicised, as outbreaks were at times blamed on the Roma.

■ During the lockdown periods, all individuals were required to stay at home and freedom of movement was restricted. JUSTROM teams reported that in some Roma neighborhoods the police presence was much more frequent than in other areas of the city. As the Open Society Roma Initiatives Office puts it in its policy brief, *"Soldiers, police personnel, and drones have been more present in Roma communities in Bulgaria and Slovakia than have nurses, doctors, and medical supplies"*<sup>60</sup>. Many Roma complained about the fines imposed on them for breaking the restriction rules, while going to buy groceries or to work.

A Roma woman in Greece was fined while going to the nearest available public water supply to bring water home.

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58. According to the information provided by JUSTROM team in Greece.

59. [https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/339154\\_tilekpaideysi-minysi-kata-kerameos-kai-zaharaki](https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/339154_tilekpaideysi-minysi-kata-kerameos-kai-zaharaki) accessed on 12 January 2022.

60. Roma in the COVID-19 crisis – An early warning from six EU Member States, Neda Korunovska and Željko Jovanović, Open Society Roma Initiatives Office, 2020.

There are numerous records of disproportionately restrictive measures against Roma during lockdowns. In April 2020, two Roma neighbourhoods in Sofia (Bulgaria), Fakulteta and Filipovtsi were placed in lockdown although at the time there was no information that more COVID-19 cases were registered in those areas than in other areas in Bulgaria. Checkpoints were set up at the entrances and exits of the neighbourhoods. Similar measures have also been taken in Roma neighborhoods in Bulgaria, located in the towns of Kazanlak, Nova Zagora, Sliven and Yambol<sup>61</sup>.

Drosero-Xanthi, one of the largest Roma neighborhoods in Greece, comprising of almost 6 000 Muslim Roma, was informally put into quarantine after a first COVID-19 infection was detected in a baby. Checkpoints were created and neither entering, nor exiting were allowed. The population of Drosero had to be tested, and only after few days, once all sampling tests were negative, the measures were lifted.

### Ethnic profiling and cases of police violence

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been widespread police raids in Roma communities.

In the Attica region (Greece), police officers exercised excessive violence against two young Roma boys: a minor of 17 years old and a person with disability of 23 years old. The disabled person was heavily beaten and two days following the beating he was admitted into hospital because of neck pains. 13 Roma were arrested in front of a church during a protest of several hundreds of people against the lockdown measures and in favour of the re-opening of the church. They were accused of violating the preventive measures against COVID-19. According to their testimonies, two of them were beaten heavily during the arrest by the police.

In Romania, several abuses were reportedly committed by the police against Roma for alleged non-compliance with the rules during the state of emergency, concerning the application and observance of social distancing and the wearing of the protective mask<sup>62</sup>. According to the research carried out by the Civic Union of Youth Roma from Romania (UCTRR), several interventions of the forces of law and order were disproportionate both in terms of the number of police/gendarmerie workers who intervened, but especially in terms of the violence of the intervention<sup>63</sup>.

These abuses took place in several localities in Romania: in Tandarei – Ialomita on 1 April 2020<sup>64</sup>, in Hunedoara<sup>65</sup> and Bolintin Vale in Giurgiu<sup>66</sup> County, on 18 April 2020, and in Bucharest on 19 April 2020.

#### Police intervention in Osiris Street, Rahova neighbourhood, Bucharest, Romania

The event took place during Easter holiday, on 19 April 2020. With the purpose of identifying several individuals who had reportedly disturbed the public order in the neighbourhood, several police and gendarmerie teams entered the home of T.V., without a warrant. During the police intervention, three Roma people were beaten up, causing T.V.'s arm being broken.

#### The "Spartacus" case

On 19 April 2020, the police intervened in a building in the Rahova neighbourhood of Bucharest, where an Easter party was taking place. The intervention was a forceful one, large number of police and gendarmes had been deployed and tear gas was used. These primarily affected the children in the courtyard, which led to a conflict between the adults and the police. As a result, 37 people, including children, were detained, 5 of whom were subsequently arrested. In the following days an impressive number of police have been patrolling the neighbourhood, including a helicopter belonging to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

61. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-bulgaria-roma-idUKKBN21B32P> accessed on 12/01/2022.

62. Established by the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 34/26.03.2020 for the modification and completion of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 1/1999 on the regime of the state of siege and the regime of the state of emergency.

63. <http://uctrr.ro/24-aprilie-2020/> Accessed on 12/01/2022.

64. <https://recorder.ro/covid-19-bomba-cu-ceas-din-tandarei/> Accessed on 12 January/2022.

65. <https://www.stiridecluj.ro/national/politistii-din-hunedoara-fugariti-de-multime-dupa-ce-au-vrut-sa-retina-un-barbat-fara-documente-de-iesit-din-casa-video> Accessed on 12 January 2022.

66. <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/evenimente/seful-politiei-din-bolintin-vale-care-a-batut-crunt-un-barbat-deja-culcat-la-pamant-in-continuare-in-functie-1341908> Accessed on 12 January 2022.

### Police intervention in the Roma community in Bolintin Vale, Giurgiu County, Romania

On 18 April 2020, in a Roma neighbourhood, in the town of Bolintin Vale, Giurgiu County, a police intervention took place. They entered in several buildings in the neighbourhood and used physical violence against several Roma. In a video broadcast in the media, a man was seen handcuffed and lying face down on the ground, while being beaten with a baton by the Bolintin Vale police chief.<sup>67</sup>

## Discrimination, antigypsyism and hate speech

■ Hate speech against Roma increased during the pandemic. Restrictive measures as the ones in Fakulteta and Filipovtsi were not taken in a vacuum, but rather inflated and, at times, instigated by hate speech. In Bulgaria, there were statements from the authorities, such as the one of Angel Djambazki (member of the European Parliament) that *“instead of closing the parks and cities to lock down Roma ghettos”*<sup>68</sup>.

■ In April, following the establishment of checkpoints outside of Sofia during the Eastern Orthodox festivities, one member of the right-wing VMRO party commented: *“Gypsies are rioting today because they are not used to respecting the law. They are rebelling because they are used to the state being a cash cow for benefits and childcare, but not a higher authority to demand anything in return from them.”*<sup>69</sup> According to him, the reason the citizens of Sofia were put under such restrictive measures was due to the increasing spread of COVID-19, caused by the return of Roma seasonal workers from Western Europe. Alexander Sidi blamed the Roma seasonal workers for the overall outbreak in Bulgaria: *Let me also remind you that the first cases of contagion and deaths came from this very contingent – gypsies who came home from abroad and made a party, despite warnings. What about the cases of those who escaped from the hospital, of those who were quarantined but went around relatives in neighbouring towns and villages?*<sup>70</sup>

■ In May 2020, a Roma neighbourhood in Yambol was disinfected by air as an initiative of the Yambol Municipality, thus stigmatising the entire Roma neighbourhood<sup>71</sup>. At the time, only 11 infections were registered in that neighbourhood. In comparison, there were 58 confirmed cases during an outbreak at a plant for auto parts in Smolyan in June 2020. However, there were no disinfection campaigns by air as a measure to contain the virus in the Smolyan case<sup>72</sup>.

■ During the pandemic, some authorities have applied restrictions which appear to have been discriminatory against Roma communities, such as walls built, roadblocks put in place, drones used for surveillance purposes or policed checkpoints established to prevent residents from entering and leaving Roma villages<sup>73</sup>. The antigypsyist discourse and anti-Roma rhetoric, which were already widespread phenomena, were fuelled by the fear caused by the pandemic, this being echoed by the actions of some public authorities, as those in the aforementioned cases. As shown above, many Roma were victims of scapegoating<sup>74</sup> and also of excessive policing and police brutality<sup>75</sup>.

## Media coverage on the Roma during lockdowns

■ From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the media coverage of hate speech against Roma communities. Roma were presented as the main culprits in the spread

67. <http://uctr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Studiu-exploratoriu-romi-LGBTI.pdf> Accessed on 12 January 2022.

[https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/imagini-de-junta-militara-operatiune-de-pedepsire-a-politiei-romane-la-adresa-unor-barbati-din-bolintin-romi-culcati-pe-jos-cu-mainile-la-spate-si-batuti-2968180?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=tolo-page-post&fbclid=IwAR0drPAmi6cp6EmX-nnT6fEQykhRiqyBUgY97kc0wVgRsVvJDII8C6cWKEc](https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/imagini-de-junta-militara-operatiune-de-pedepsire-a-politiei-romane-la-adresa-unor-barbati-din-bolintin-romi-culcati-pe-jos-cu-mainile-la-spate-si-batuti-2968180?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=tolo-page-post&fbclid=IwAR0drPAmi6cp6EmX-nnT6fEQykhRiqyBUgY97kc0wVgRsVvJDII8C6cWKEc) Accessed on 12 January 2022.

68. The Member of the European Parliament Angel Djambazki announced: *“This virus kills mostly people who live without rules, without isolation and people who do whatever they want. I have made it clear – there must be a complete closure of the gypsy ghettos and complete freedom for people who are disciplined. We need to close the ghettos and open the parks”* (<https://novini.bg/bylgariya/politika/593963>) – accessed on 12 January 2022.

69. Александър Сиди: Предупредихме, че гетата ще са це... – Столица.bg ([stolica.bg](https://stolica.bg)) accessed on 12 January 2022.

70. <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/sidi-romite-se-buntuvat-zashtoto-ne-sa-sviknali-da-spazvat-zakonite-2222308> accessed on 12 January 2022.

71. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EUR1529612020ENGLISH.pdf> accessed on 12 January 2022

72. <https://bntnews.bg/news/58-ot-testvanite-rabotnici-v-smolyan-%E2%80%93-covid-19-no-ne-sa-bolni-1062689news.html> accessed on 12/01/2022.

73. The impact of the coronavirus crisis on Roma and Travellers, background document of the European Parliament, available here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/690524/EPRS\\_ATA\(2021\)690524\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/690524/EPRS_ATA(2021)690524_EN.pdf)

74. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/overview\\_of\\_covid19\\_and\\_roma\\_-\\_impact\\_-\\_measures\\_-\\_priorities\\_for\\_funding\\_-\\_23\\_04\\_2020.docx.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/overview_of_covid19_and_roma_-_impact_-_measures_-_priorities_for_funding_-_23_04_2020.docx.pdf) accessed on 12/01/2022.

75. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2021-11-22/14/condemning-police-violence-against-romani-people-in-the-eu> accessed on 12/01/2022.



of the virus and as those who did not want to follow the rules imposed by the Government. *“The media has always linked crime to people’s ethnicity, showing lavish parties of Roma families creating the impression that all Roma are rich, which induces a sense of hatred from the majority.”*<sup>76</sup>

■ Improper and insensitive narratives by political figures, as shown above; the ethnicisation of the pandemic in the media, by depicting the Roma living in settlements or ghettos as a peril for the rest of the population, as undisciplined people or a drain on the society – further exacerbated already existing anti-Roma sentiments.

■ In some instances, Roma have been depicted as main carriers of the virus and quickly became the scapegoat for the pandemic<sup>77</sup>. Indeed, in a number of cases, Roma communities were targeted by the media (especially in the social media) as a threat to the public health. They would often be described as undisciplined rule breakers who do not adhere to the social distancing rules. On one occasion in Greece, Roma communities from Drosero-Xanthi were characterised as “hygiene bombs” by stakeholders and officials<sup>78</sup>.

■ On other occasions, Roma were targeted by hate speech due to their eligibility to receive IT equipment, so their children could attend online classes. In these cases, Roma were portrayed as queuing to receive the equipment only to re-sell it as they were perceived as not sending their children to school, etc.

■ The Civic Union of Young Roma in Romania identified five NAC (National Audiovisual Council) decisions in which Romanian media were sanctioned for broadcasting content that incited hatred, discrimination and/or defamation of Roma. The decisions concerned content that denigrated the community in the context of the emergency measures during the COVID-19 pandemic and spread stereotypes associating Roma with crime.

■ As an example, during a broadcast on Romania TV, a topic of discussion was the testing for COVID-19 of a Roma community in the west of the country. One of the guests, a well-known political personality, Petre Roman, commented *“Look... I want to express... to state what is my opinion and my conviction and that is to be aware that because of these gypsy gangs in the West there is a bad, bad image of Romania, there is a bad perception of Romania... not only because of them, but to a large extent because of these gypsy gangs who rob, steal, commit acts of violence (...) you know very well the importance of image and perception...”*(see Council Decision No. 339/2020).<sup>79</sup>

■ It has to be mentioned, though, that Roma were not always portrayed negatively. In one major positive portrayal, the head of the scientific team and government main spokesperson for the pandemic in Greece spoke publicly in very positive terms about Roma, emphasising that “Roma are not a threat, they are a vulnerable group”<sup>80</sup>.

76. <http://uctrr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Studiu-exploratoriu-romi-LGBTI.pdf> accessed on 12 January 2022.

77. <https://www.hhrjournal.org/2020/04/anti-roma-racism-is-spiraling-during-covid-19-pandemic/> accessed on 12 January 2022.  
[https://www.dor.ro/roma-and-the-ethnicization-of-covid-19-in-romania/?fbclid=IwAR1dvDC1H\\_DnuiWCFJ4e7gD5rQJfrU5OcM5Cp9StMdt54N3DIhFCiccvM0w](https://www.dor.ro/roma-and-the-ethnicization-of-covid-19-in-romania/?fbclid=IwAR1dvDC1H_DnuiWCFJ4e7gD5rQJfrU5OcM5Cp9StMdt54N3DIhFCiccvM0w) accessed on 12 January 2022.

78. <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/koronoios-ygeionomiki-bomba-o-oikismos-roma-xanthi;%20https://www.ertnews.gr/perifereiakoi-stathmoi/patra/dytiki-acha%CE%90a-ygeionomiki-vomvaioi-roma-dimotiki-archi-kai-katoikoi-zitoyin-pio-aystira-metra/> accessed on 12 January 2022.

79. [https://www.cna.ro/IMG/pdf/Dec339\\_som\\_Rom\\_TVsom-64\\_1b\\_65c\\_si\\_47-3\\_Cod.pdf](https://www.cna.ro/IMG/pdf/Dec339_som_Rom_TVsom-64_1b_65c_si_47-3_Cod.pdf), Decision of National Audiovisual Council of Romania no. 339 of 07.05.2020. page 6, accessed on 12 January 2022.

80. <https://www.in.gr/2020/04/10/greece/tsiodras-gia-roma-den-einai-apeili-alla-eyaloti-omada/> accessed on 12 January 2022.

## IMPACT OF THE JUSTROM PROGRAMME

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■ On the occasion of launching the toolkit for governments across Europe on respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law during the COVID-19 crisis, the Council of Europe Secretary General, Marija Pejčinović Burić, has underlined “(...)that governments are facing formidable challenges in seeking to protect their populations from the threat of COVID-19 (...). It is precisely here that the Council of Europe must carry out its core mandate by providing, through its statutory organs and all its competent bodies and mechanisms, the forum for collectively ensuring that these measures remain proportional to the threat posed by the spread of the virus and be limited in time. The virus is destroying many lives and much else of what is very dear to us. We should not let it destroy our core values and free societies.”<sup>81</sup>

■ The initial focus of the JUSTROM programme was strongly challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the JUSTROM teams needed to re-shape some of their activities (postpone the meetings, move them online) and also to respond to new needs and new situations.

■ Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges, not previously seen, which posed incredible challenges to the JUSTROM teams. The new circumstances meant that the working methodology and ways of communication had to adapt and change. Most of the communication was transferred online (especially during lockdowns), but the teams tried to have periodical offline engagement with the communities: in Romania – weekly visits in Ferentari, Salaj, Zabrautului and Rahova areas. Legal consultants in Greece maintained an open line of communication with the beneficiaries in Roma communities, via telephone, whatsapp and viber. Whenever they could, they were present physically in the communities in the Attica region (including Athens), Thessaloniki and Xanthi. In Italy, the lead facilitator in Rome never stopped visiting the communities, thanks to a special authorisation, while the Naples facilitators moved from one family to another, as much as possible, since they had been living in the Scampia settlement for years. In Bulgaria, the teams gave legal consultations and information via the phone.

### Distribution of sanitary products

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■ JUSTROM teams participated in the distribution of sanitary products too. In Romania, over 3 000 products for the prevention of COVID-19 infection were distributed (masks, disinfectants). 2 000 masks were offered to the Roma community in Sector 5 in Bucharest. At the same time, the facilitators informed about the pandemic and the restrictions put in place and they distributed over 1 000 forms for the mandatory declarations required by the authorities during lockdown in order to leave one’s home and go shopping for essentials, etc. In Italy, thanks to the facilitation from JUSTROM, the MIGRANTES Apulia Foundation sent 500 masks to Roma Office at Naples Municipality on a weekly basis, for 3 weeks, from April 2020 (leading to a total of 2500 masks)<sup>82</sup>.

### Access to information

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■ Consultants helped Roma women and their families navigate and cope with the uncertainty created by the pandemic: from understanding and complying with the mobility restrictions to accessing food vouchers, relief funding and other emergency benefits put in place by governments.

■ In Romania, 25 Roma young and single mothers, elderly Roma women or Roma with different health issues were assisted mainly in accessing the social public services, as they had low digital skills. The teams in Bulgaria provided information about the protection against domestic violence, protection against discrimination, access to social benefits. In Italy, consultants assisted Roma in the spring of 2020 to obtain the food vouchers/packages allocated by the municipalities<sup>83</sup>.

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81. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/coronavirus-guidance-to-governments-on-respecting-human-rights-democracy-and-the-rule-of-law> accessed on 12 January 2022.

82. Most masks were distributed by a network of institutional and non-institutional stateholders (Comunità di Sant’Egidio, Arrevutammoce NGO, NEA NGO, JUSTROM facilitators also in Giugliano area), including JUSTROM facilitators who live in a settlement.

83. From the Italian country report for the JUSTROM programme, 2021.

## Digital access

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■ A special problem for Roma's access to information proved to be the barriers in accessing digital information<sup>84</sup>. This was exacerbated by the fact that a majority of public services had their work moved partially or, at times, even totally online. For many Roma it became increasingly difficult to get access for obtaining administrative documents (birth/death/disease certificates), for legal services or social services (soup kitchen, relief funding, etc). Not only did they lack the operational skills (scanning, sending e-mails) but also electronic devices and/or Internet connection. JUSTROM teams assisted the Roma with low digital skills in accessing legal and public social services.

## Lack of information regarding the sanitary crisis

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■ As mentioned above, many Roma households do not have electronic devices, internet or TV connection. In the case where information is available, it is not necessarily accessible to the Roma population, either on account of language barriers or as a result of low literacy levels. Thus, Roma are increasingly at risk of misinformation. In this context, JUSTROM teams participated in local and national emergency campaigns and shared information about the prevention from COVID-19 infection and about the vaccines and the vaccination campaigns.

■ In Bulgaria, the JUSTROM team disseminated leaflets in Romani and Turkish. The team translated brochures in Turkish and Roma language, and more than 2 000 brochures were disseminated in Roma neighbourhoods in Plovdiv and Veliko Tarnovo regions. This was especially important as the National Operational Headquarters<sup>85</sup> were not providing information in any language other than Bulgarian and so the JUSTROM team was trying to fill that gap in the localities. Mediators also shared the information directly with the persons who could not read and explained the information. The brochures include information about COVID-19 and how to prevent infections. Additionally, brochures about the vaccination against COVID-19 were disseminated. The mediators also disseminated flyers about education during COVID-19 and access to different types of social and family support.

■ In Italy, the JUSTROM team intended to disseminate information on COVID-19 in Romani, via Facebook. Instead, the information was delivered in Italian via phone and whatsapp, given that one Municipality did not authorise the dissemination of the document in Romani, considering that the language was not officially recognised in Italy. This would have been important for the prevention and information on COVID-19, as there were no dedicated channels of communication, with the exception of a specific website launched by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – Rome Office jointly with ARCI NGO for migrants, refugees and stateless people<sup>86</sup>.

■ At the same time, the involvement with the communities increased to an unprecedented level. Communities showed exemplary mobilisation (especially the women), which led to a "good experience for civic and solidarity moment of Roma women and families" (Romania). JUSTROM teams assisted Roma women community leaders to initiate activities in their community in order to prevent, mitigate and/or overcome the negative impact of COVID-19; they engaged by organising awareness raising gatherings, delivering mentoring and organising outreach activities.

■ Furthermore, teams monitored racist attitudes both in the online and offline public spheres and reported them to relevant national authorities and/or international organisations.

■ The teams created partnerships with various stakeholders and facilitated the access of authorities, NGOs, and organisations such as the Red Cross to Roma communities. They advocated towards relevant local authorities for the provision of public services, in particular access to healthcare, to water, to ensure the collection of garbage, equal access to online education. In Romania, for instance, multiple meetings were held with the aim to facilitate the access to water of the people in the Ses Bahlui neighbourhood in Iasi.

■ However, these actions, though contributing to mitigating the impact of COVID-19 negative effects in the short run, cannot minimise the structural concerns that Roma communities face, and the importance of more effective measures taken by the authorities.

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84. The problem was also highlighted in the previous sections.

85. Established on 26 February 2020 by an Order No P-37 of the Prime Minister to organize and coordinate the actions of the competent state authorities in connection with the declared by the World Health Organization public health emergency of international importance regarding the disease COVID-19.

86. <https://www.unhcr.org/it/emergenza-coronavirus/> accessed on 12 January 2022.

## CONCLUSIONS

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■ Roma communities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic in all areas: from access to justice and healthcare, to housing, education and employment. The pandemic acted as an accelerator which aggravated pre-existing serious issues that Roma communities were already facing; inequalities in health, employment, education, etc. only grew higher. At the same time, these gaps themselves aggravated the situation of Roma, by posing increasing risks of infection: lack of running water meant increased risk for Roma to get the virus. Structural barriers became even more ingrained leading to an almost infernal vicious circle, where little escape was possible.

■ Hate speech, scapegoating, police brutality and media coverage that ethnicised the pandemic only made matters worse. Already fragile categories, such as Roma women, found themselves in worse situations as domestic violence increased and they were supra-responsabilised with household chores and the online education of their children.

■ Governments were less prepared for addressing structural inequalities and the heightened risk of infection: the measures put in place to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic simply did not consider the issues Roma face: online applications for digital illiterate people; unemployment funds for persons working in the informal economy; vaccination for persons with no identification papers.

■ NGOs and international programmes, such as JUSTROM, had to adapt and try to fill the enormous gaps and respond to the many issues Roma persons face during the pandemic. In many cases, they were their only support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES FOR ALLEVIATING THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON ROMA COMMUNITIES

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- ▶ Tailored measures that take into account the vulnerabilities of Roma communities (especially in relation to mitigation efforts)
- ▶ Designing policies by taking into account the specificities of various categories within Roma communities (women, girls, the elderly, children, disabled persons, etc.)
- ▶ Facilitate access of Roma women and children, victims of violence, to shelters and specifically introduce measures to prevent under-reporting and under-registering
- ▶ Offer adequate temporary housing alternatives in order to uncrowd high density Roma communities and ensure adequate access to clean drinking water, sanitary equipment and properly monitor the situation
- ▶ Involve Roma in the decision-making for all policies affecting their communities
- ▶ Establish and uphold a relationship of confidence between marginalised vulnerable groups and the authorities
- ▶ Run vaccination campaigns against COVID-19 within Roma communities – by using local Roma role models, leaders and mediators
- ▶ Ensure that Roma have access to the vaccine for COVID-19 in a non-discriminatory manner and take positive measures to secure vaccination on a priority basis for the most vulnerable groups among Roma, including the elderly and persons with chronic diseases and those living in dense settlements
- ▶ Implement mass vaccination programmes for other diseases, as long as the pandemic measures will be likely to increase the number of non-vaccinated Roma children
- ▶ Hire and train health mediators which will ensure inclusion in the healthcare services and help building confidence
- ▶ Ensure appropriate communication in public media and through Roma health mediators – In this sense, the role of Roma education and health mediators proved crucial, as they mainly live in the same communities. They also engendered the much-needed trust among marginalised Roma communities and became community gatekeepers
- ▶ Implement guidelines for police authorities on combating over-policing and decrease sanctions for lockdown violations when these violations are necessary for accessing water, sanitation and access to healthcare
- ▶ Register the police forces participating in actions within communities with identification elements inscribed on the equipment and/or body camera so that, if they are accused of committing possible abuses/offences, they can be sanctioned individually
- ▶ Train police officers on Roma issues (history, culture, hate crime, hate speech etc.)
- ▶ Establish and strengthen police units dedicated to locating and combating hate speech and fake news against the Roma communities, online and offline, and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice
- ▶ Support initiatives that provide alternative, well-informed, and credible information and narratives about the Roma that counter hate speech and fake news

The Member States of the European Union have decided to link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.

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